

PRO/CON: Is now the time for climate change laws in the U.S.?

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According to the U.S. Department of Energy, about 43 percent of Americans' carbon footprint comes from buildings. Solar-powered electricity is a great option for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, if homeowners can afford it. Photo: Don Kelsen/ Los Angeles Times/MCT

PRO: Congress could at least try

GREEN BAY, Wis. — In a report released this fall, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said that the warming of the Earth's climate system can't be disputed.

The IPCC is an organization of scientists set up by the United Nations. Its conclusion is based on several independent sources of information.

The study also found that it was "extremely likely" that human influence has been the major cause of [climate change \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global warming\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global+warming). Our burning of oil, coal, and gas is particularly to blame.

When we burn coal, oil or gas, it creates greenhouse gases, which heat up the earth and change our climate.

Need National Commitment

At the same time, international meetings have had little luck in getting countries to agree to produce less greenhouse gas. The Climate Change Conference just concluded in Poland but didn't result in any great agreement. Yet, these gases are serious risks for the world's businesses, its environment and public health.

A major reason for the slow pace of global action is the United States, where we produce more greenhouse gases than any other country on a per-person basis. And we simply haven't stepped up to a leadership position.

Nor, for that matter, has China, which has been developing quickly and building new cities and factories. That has pushed it to the No. 1 spot in producing greenhouse gas in total. It produces less per person than the U.S., but it has more than four times as many people as the U.S. does.

What might the United States do to convincingly show that it is finally prepared to play a leading role in slowing the rate of global climate change?

Passing a full-fledged national climate change law would be a good start.

The United States has hardly been standing still on the issue. More than half of the states and more than a thousand U.S. cities have passed a range of policies. These should substantially reduce the release of greenhouse gas emissions. They include new actions on renewable fuels, some of which are made from vegetables, instead of oil. There have also been laws passed to make sure energy isn't wasted, and to promote public transportation.

Much has happened at the federal level too. The Obama administration has spent tens of billions of dollars on cutting-edge research to develop renewable energy technologies, such as wind or solar power.

Sending A Strong Signal

The administration also reached important agreements with the auto industry. Fuel standards are set to be raised for cars to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025. The new standards mean big savings in the use of oil.

Equally important, the White House and the Environmental Protection Agency are developing regulations for coal-fired power plants. These promise to begin shifting the nation away from the use of coal and toward other types of energy that release far fewer greenhouse gases.

Yet the new regulations and policy plans are not enough to tackle climate change. They also come with no national political commitment. If there was, it might push reluctant nations around the world to do their own part. And some actions are certain to be challenged in court by the oil industry.

National climate change policy would send a strong signal to the world. It would show that the United States takes climate change seriously, and that it is prepared to step out in front on the issue.

How likely is it that a divided Congress can pass climate change legislation? It is not likely at present. And it won't happen as long as Republicans continue to deny the existence of climate change and defend the oil industry at all costs.

Nonetheless, it is essential that Congress at least try. It needs to design and approve a national climate change policy, and it should do so soon. It needs to hold hearings, hear experts, review the evidence, and debate the issue at length to build support.

Congress should explore all the tools it has. It must find ways to appeal to Republicans. If it needs to find ways that make businesses happy, then it should. Clearly, this will be an uphill battle, but it is necessary to try.

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CON: Congress could screw things up

XIAN, China — Congress should not waste time debating a sweeping climate change law in the coming year. First, our production of greenhouse gases has already fallen on its own. We started using more natural gas thanks to a new method called fracking. Plus, the economy has been stuck for a while which means factories are creating less emissions. And that's without Congress doing anything at all.

If they did jump in, they'd be as likely to screw that up as make things better.

In addition, we should wait because the current proposals on how to reduce greenhouse gases are all expensive. Lowering the amount of greenhouse gas produced will be cheaper in the future as technologies improve.

Consider the change in cellphone technology and prices over the past 20 years. Cellphones used to be the size of bricks. Today, even schoolchildren carry iPhones. Those are far more powerful, and much cheaper than old cellphones.

That same process of improvement will create new technology to cut greenhouse gases. It will make efforts at fixing climate change cheaper and better in the future.

Act Later, Not Sooner

The United States can do next to nothing about greenhouse gases on its own. We shouldn't burden American businesses in attempting to do so single-handedly.

China and India are growing rapidly and the additional greenhouse gases they produce will swamp any cuts possible in the U.S. today.

For example, Chinese car ownership per person is less than U.S. car ownership was in 1920.

When — not if — Chinese consumers close that gap, they'll be driving more than 20 times the number of cars they are driving today. Chinese electricity consumption is growing rapidly too. New coal power plants are opening there all the time.

If we cut greenhouse gases by ourselves it would be pointless. And it would hurt negotiators in any effort to reach an agreement with developing countries like China and India.

Those nations will certainly insist on cuts from the developed world as part of the price of any cuts in greenhouse gases they agree to.

We shouldn't cut our own production of greenhouse gases before an agreement is reached. If we do, we will have to make even more painful cuts to persuade developing countries to sign on.

Elections Loom Large

Finally, Congress is going to be unable to reach agreement on any major laws before the 2014 elections. The leaders of the House and Senate are barely on speaking terms with each other.

A serious approach to climate change is going to touch on many areas of Americans' daily lives. Cutting greenhouse gases is ultimately going to require huge changes in how much energy we use.

Energy touches every part of our lives. So, this is a subject that requires careful consideration and extended debate. We need candidates putting forward clear-cut proposals and debating their strengths and weaknesses on the campaign trail. Then voters can make a choice about the type of approach they want to see. That hasn't happened yet and debating something this important requires more discussion than we've had so far.

In addition, the members of Congress are gearing up for their 2014 elections. Their attention will be on fundraising, not passing a good law.

Starting a new debate on such a significant issue right before an election is a recipe for drafting a really bad law. Writing a major bill will touch on nearly every area of the U.S. To suggest it in an election year will be inviting every group in the country — with their own political and money needs — to a party. And we, the taxpayers, would get to play the role of the pinata.

Discussion, not speed, is what we need.

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Quiz

- 1 How would the PRO author likely respond to the following claim by the CON author?

"If we cut greenhouse gases by ourselves it would be pointless. And it would hurt negotiators in any effort to reach an agreement with developing countries like China and India."

- (A) He would say that China and India are not producing as much greenhouse gas as the United States.
- (B) He would say that the United States should threaten India and China so they add climate change laws.
- (C) He would say that the United States needs to act as a global leader in the fight to slow climate change.
- (D) He would say that the United States has already passed a range of policies working to slow climate change.

- 2 How would the CON author likely respond to the following claim by the PRO author:

"Nonetheless, it is essential that Congress at least try. It needs to design and approve a national climate change policy, and it should do so soon. It needs to hold hearings, hear experts, review the evidence, and debate the issue at length to build support."

- (A) He would say trying to pass a law now is pointless because of China and impossible because of Congress.
- (B) He would say that cellphone technology will help slow climate change.
- (C) He would say that climate change is not caused by humans and that humans cannot stop it.
- (D) He would say that trying to pass a law is a waste of time because climate change is not caused by greenhouse gases.

- 3 What evidence BEST supports the PRO author's argument that something needs to be done about climate change right away?

- (A) numbers on new fuel standards
- (B) information from the IPCC study
- (C) statistics from the Climate Change Conference
- (D) amount of money spent on renewable energy by the government

4 What evidence is the LEAST relevant in the CON article?

- (A) statistics on Chinese drivers
- (B) the mention of the 2014 elections
- (C) information on cellphone technology development
- (D) information on the relationship between the House and the Senate

Answer Key

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